



# SKELETONS IN YOUR CLOSET?

An ongoing HSUS investigation reveals deception in the sale of animal fur garments

by RUTHANNE JOHNSON

**Pedicure for Mom?** Check. Hedge trimmer for Uncle Joe? Check. Coat with collar made of raccoon dog for daughter Susie?

Say what?

Garments fashioned from a wild member of the dog family don't exactly rise to the top of most people's holiday gift lists. But a woman in Odessa, Texas, is among the many who've been duped into buying exactly that for themselves and their loved ones.

Debbie McMillan's 2006 purchase at Dillard's—a coat with a collar advertised as the fur of raccoon, an entirely different species—was quickly followed by the release of an HSUS investigation documenting the sale of mislabeled raccoon dog fur products at several large retailers. For McMillan, who'd been around animals her whole life and knew how coarse raccoon fur can be, it was too much of a coincidence. "I immediately became suspicious."

She launched her own mini-investigation, heading over to JCPenney, one of the retailers named in the exposé. The collars on the coats she looked at felt the same as the fur on the coat in her possession. McMillan later learned that raccoon dogs are raised in cages by the millions and often skinned alive in China. "The more I thought about it, the madder I got," she says. "You can't just stick a label on something that's not true. That's misrepresentation."

Unfortunately for McMillan and millions of other unsuspecting consumers, it's all too common. Lax enforcement of state and federal regulations—coupled with a gaping loophole that allows many cheaper products to go unlabeled—leads to bewilderment in the marketplace. Coats and other fur-trimmed garments are often labeled incorrectly, if they're labeled at all; discrepancies between advertising and labeling of these products add another layer of confusion.

The fur of the raccoon dog—a member of the canine family whose markings resemble those of a raccoon—has been sold as faux, raccoon, Asiatic raccoon, rabbit, and coyote.

The deceit even extends to the realm of fur sold as fake, as Delaware state Rep. Melanie George Marshall learned after buying a sweater with trim falsely labeled as faux. "This made me angry because I am very careful about what I buy," says Marshall, who later introduced a successful Delaware bill requiring all garments with animal fur to be labeled.

Consumers might expect truth from well-known retailers, but ongoing investigations led The HSUS to file a lawsuit in November against several of the biggest names in the industry—including Dillard's, Saks Fifth Avenue, Macy's (which also owns Bloomingdale's), Lord & Taylor, and Neiman Marcus—for repeatedly engaging in false marketing or labeling of animal fur products. Andrew Marc, the only designer named in the lawsuit, has recently decided

to do right by consumers, reaching an agreement with The HSUS to phase out its use of raccoon dog fur, label all its fur-containing garments regardless of price, and endorse strengthening the federal fur labeling law.

In February, an HSUS investigation of New York retailers revealed that Bloomingdale's and Saks, along with Bergdorf Goodman, were selling unlabeled fur-trimmed garments in violation of a 2007 state law.

"Retailers have had more than a year to comply with this law, and it is appalling that so many have disregarded it," says state Assemblymember Linda Rosenthal, who sponsored the bill and helped The HSUS conduct spot checks of stores.

#### FROM COMPANIONS TO COAT TRIM

Even as more than 100 designers and retailers such as Calvin Klein and Overstock.com swear off fur for good, an estimated 75 million animals are still killed annually for their



## HOW YOU CAN HELP

- **BUY FUR-FREE PRODUCTS:** Support fur-free retailers and designers; for a list, check [humanesociety.org/furfreeshopping](http://humanesociety.org/furfreeshopping). Urge companies that use or sell fur to go fur-free.
- **MAKE A FASHION STATEMENT:** If you wear faux fur, don The HSUS's Fur-Free button to ensure "you don't accidentally promote the fashion of animal fur," says The HSUS's Pierre Grzybowski.
- **TURN 'EM IN:** Report suspected false advertising or labeling of animal fur at [humanesociety.org/furlabelreport](http://humanesociety.org/furlabelreport). You can also file a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission, which enforces federal labeling laws, at [ftc.gov](http://ftc.gov). The more complaints the agency receives, the more likely it is to take action, Grzybowski says.
- **SUPPORT BETTER LAWS:** Contact your federal legislators and urge them to support the Truth in Fur Labeling Act, introduced in the 110th Congress to close the labeling loophole and protect raccoon dogs; the bill was sponsored by Sens. Bob Menendez, D-N.J., and Norm Coleman, R-Minn., and Reps. Jim Moran, D-Va., and Mike Ferguson, R-N.J. If you live in California, Illinois, Maryland, or New Jersey, ask your state legislators to support labeling bills slated for introduction in those states. Find contact information for your legislators at [humanesociety.org/leglookup](http://humanesociety.org/leglookup).
- **COMFORT THE ANIMALS:** Turn that fur coat you inherited or no longer want into bedding for injured and orphaned wildlife. Find out how at [humanesociety.org/coatsforcubs](http://humanesociety.org/coatsforcubs).





pelts. In the U.S., no federal laws govern the humane treatment and slaughter of animals in fur confinement operations. The animals are crammed into tiny cages where they often develop neurotic behaviors such as constant pacing and self-mutilation, and they're killed by gassing, neck breaking, or anal electrocution. The U.S. is the world's leading fur trapping country; each year, millions of wild animals such as foxes, coyotes, wolves, fishers, and bobcats likely endure prolonged and painful deaths in steel-jaw leghold traps, snares, or body-crushing traps.

The situation may be worse in China, the world's largest exporter of fur and a nation devoid of effective animal welfare laws. In a 1998 investigation of China's fur industry, The HSUS and Humane Society International found that garments made of



dogs and cats were being exported to foreign markets. Investigators filmed dogs being raised for their fur in cold, squalid

conditions and found warehouses full of cat fur ready for buyers; they also saw a fully conscious German shepherd being bled to death in public view.

The investigation—and the discovery of domestic dog fur sales in the U.S.—led to the passage of the Dog and Cat Protection Act of 2000, which banned the import, export, and sale of dog and cat fur.

In spite of the regulations, The HSUS was still discovering dog fur products for sale as recently as 2007. It also continues to find rampant misrepresentation of all types of fur. Seeking better enforcement and stricter laws, The HSUS's Fur-Free Campaign has helped bring evidence before the Federal Trade Commission, Congress, and state legislatures, including those in New York and Delaware, which have strength-

## FASHION SENSE

## PRODUCT LABELS AREN'T THE ONLY PLACE WHERE DECEPTION REIGNS IN THE FUR INDUSTRY

**Scrambling to stanch the bleeding** in global fur sales, furriers have hopped on the sustainability bandwagon; a Fur Council of Canada executive has gone so far as to suggest nature lovers buy a fur coat as a natural extension of riding a bike to work and recycling. *Toxic Fur*, an HSUS report released in late January, pokes holes in these absurd claims, pointing out that fur production is energy- and pollution-intensive and ecologically destructive.

Although the industry's little green lies have undoubtedly lured some designers to the dark side, others refuse to be fooled. And The HSUS is leading the way in exposing the truth to the next generation of designers, holding its annual Cool vs. Cruel contest for students at The

Art Institute's national network of fashion schools. Participants take a crash course on animal abuse in the fur industry before competing to come up with the best cruelty-free design as decided by a panel of fashion VIPs. The competition gives The HSUS a chance to spotlight the quality of humanely produced clothing, embraced by more and more designers in the wake of HSUS exposés of the fur industry.

"We're not cave people; we're moving into 2010, and I think it's time we put the fur away," says Gohar Rajabzadeh, a student at Miami International University of Art & Design and the winner of the 2008 contest for her blue wrap coat made of acrylic yarn. "There are synthetic technologies that look and feel just like fur and leather. Some of these fabrics are heavy and thick and keep you just as warm as animal fur."

Rajabzadeh will make plenty of use of these technologies after she graduates this fall, with plans to launch a fur-free line for young girls. Her advice for fellow designers considering whether to use fur in their collections? Watch the videos of what really happens at fur facilities. "They should also compare the price between animal skins and synthetic fabrics," she says. "I think people will realize it's not worth it. Working with synthetic fabrics saves money and your conscience."



Gohar Rajabzadeh



The waste of animals confined at fur facilities can pollute local waterways.

➤ **TO READ** *Toxic Fur*, visit [humanesociety.org/furhurtlethepplanet](http://humanesociety.org/furhurtlethepplanet).



ened relevant statutes. “This is about consumer awareness, especially for people who don’t want anything to do with fur,” says New York’s Rosenthal.

## CLOSING THE LOOPHOLE

The fur industry has long swept its dirty secrets under the rug. In the mid-1900s, rabbit fur was marketed under the more exotic-sounding names of “coney” and “lapin.” In 1951, congressional testimony about other names being used to deceive consumers about rabbit fur—including “electric beaver,” “French chinchilla,” “Baltic lion,” and “muskratine,” according to published reports at the time—led to the passage of the Fur Products Labeling Act, which requires garment labels to indicate the correct English name for the species and the country where the animal was trapped or raised.

But the law exempted products containing only a certain amount of fur—defined today as \$150 worth, or the equivalent of fur from 30 rabbits or an entire raccoon dog skin. Often slipping through this generous loophole are fur-trimmed items from countries with cheap labor and little regulation. The HSUS is pushing a federal bill, the Truth in Fur Labeling Act, that would require accurate labeling of all fur products and proper identification of fur made from raccoon dogs.

The efforts have been bolstered by people like McMillan, whose experience at Dillard’s turned her into a citizen activist. After discovering she’d been deceived and turning to The HSUS’s Pierre Grzybowski for help, she spoke at a press conference in support of closing the labeling loophole. Her written testimony also was used in a 2007 petition The HSUS filed with the Federal Trade Commission, asking the agency to take enforcement action against 12 retailers and designers in violation of the labeling law.

To prepare for her testimony, McMillan watched footage from The HSUS that exposed her to more cruelties than she cares to remember. Today, she’s crossed all fur off her shopping list. “I love the feel of fur but will never go into another store to buy any,” she says. “I much prefer it on the live animal. They need it more than I do.”

# False Identities

## TO PUT YOUR FAUX FUR GARMENT TO THE TEST, TAKE THESE TIPS FROM A SUPERSLEUTH

**He trolls stores** and the Internet in search of fraud. He collects suspicious items and examines them under the lens of a microscope. He meticulously documents each step in a long chain of evidence.

As a kind of forensics detective working on behalf of animals, Pierre Grzybowski fills in where government enforcement agencies have left off, dissecting garments to find out what they’re really made of—and whether their makers and sellers are violating fur labeling and consumer protection laws.

“I’m like a secret shopper who prosecutes,” says the deputy manager of The HSUS’s Fur-Free Campaign. “We prepare for the possibility that every coat or fur product we’ve collected will need to come with us as evidence when we take the stand and testify—because this is not just a question of immense animal suffering; it’s also about breaking the law.”

Grzybowski has checked so many garments for fur that he can often ferret out the truth within seconds. When he needs something more scientific to back up his findings, he sends the clothes to labs for more advanced analysis.

For less tech-savvy consumers who want to know whether that supposedly faux-trimmed coat they just purchased was ever part of a living creature, Grzybowski offers these tips.

► **BURN TEST:** If you’ve already purchased the garment, carefully remove a few hairs with tweezers and ignite them while holding them over a dish or other nonflammable surface (never conduct the test near flammable objects or on hairs still attached to the jacket). Faux fur generally emanates a plastic-like odor, while animal fur smells similar to burnt human hair. Once the residue has cooled, rub it between your index and forefinger. Animal fur reduces to ash, while synthetic fibers generally leave behind a black bead that can be rolled between your fingers.

► **VISUAL TEST:** Push apart the hairs to see if the backing is animal skin or a woven, grid-like fabric, which indicates faux fur. Also, don’t assume that colored fur is fake. Real fur can be dyed any color. Some real animal fur that has not been sheared or plucked will have longer “guard hairs” that taper to a point and disappear like a cat’s whiskers.

► **ONLINE TEST:** “Online purchases can be especially difficult,” Grzybowski says. “Although not very reliable, you can zoom in close on pictures of the garment and look for tapering of the guard hairs on the fur, which are usually a bit longer and thicker than the insulatory base coat of fur.” This is easier to spot with dark fur against a light background and vice versa. Inconsistency in labeling among Web pages may also reveal that something is amiss. Always inspect the clothing when it arrives to ensure it matches what was promised.

The HSUS’s Pierre Grzybowski has an eye for deceitful design.

